Playing the race card from a new perspective

BY RON WEISKIND
BLOCK NEWS ALLIANCE

The details are the salvation of Desmond Nakano's race-reversal film *White Man's Burden*. The problem is in the drama that is supposed to humanize the message.

The world envisioned in the movie turns on the simplest of what-ifs. Suppose America had developed so that the dominant culture was African rather than European?

A cynic might say it adds up to yet another Hollywood movie in which the plight of blacks is told through the experience of whites. But there's a wild card at play here. Writer-director Nakano, who is of Japanese descent, serves as a semi-neutral observer — he's experienced discrimination due to the color of his skin, but not from the perspective of either group portrayed in the movie.

So he can deal the ironies from both ends of the table. A white man is roughed up by black police officers and beaten bloody because they think he resembles a criminal suspect. An obviously cultured and refined black businessman laments the loss of his investment in an inner-city shopping center, wondering what kind of creatures white people must be to burn down their own neighborhood.

Harry Belafonte plays a businessman in 'what-if' drama.

These are tunes we are all wearily familiar with. But we're not used to hearing them sung this way. When a black woman speaks about how darling white children look or when a white child turns on the television set and sees nothing but black faces, it can be as bracing as a stiff winter wind or a slap across the face. Walk a mile in the other guy's shoes and one may learn what it's like to be oppressed — or to be the oppressor.

Wisely, Nakano does not dwell on these moments, letting them speak for themselves. But the movie cannot live on observation alone. Sooner or later, it must tell a story. And that's when the movie's good intentions take a wrong turn off the freeway.

John Travolta portrays Louis Pinnock, who works in a candy factory owned by Thaddeus Thomas (Harry Belafonte). A misunderstanding results in Louis losing his job. He can't find work, he can't make ends meet, his wife (Kelly Lynch) is losing patience. Desperation leads him to confront Thaddeus but events spin out of control. In the end, the two men must judge each other on the basis of character and not skin color — and hope it's not too late.

The setup unfortunately dilutes the film's racial angle. Disgruntled employee, insensitive boss? We can all recite examples of both. Travolta's complaint in the movie has as much to do with class as with race.

But the bigger problem is that once Louis' plan goes awry, the plot doesn't go anywhere. The story has a beginning and end but no middle. Nakano needs to make Thaddeus see that Louis is a good and caring father but the scenes in which the two men interact with Louis' son, considering the situation, are faintly absurd.

Finally, the dynamic between Louis and Thaddeus just doesn't work. Considering the bigoted remarks we have heard from Thaddeus about whites, his reaction to Louis's brazen interruption of his life seems just too reasonable and emotionless. Nakano wants us to see that neither man is evil, but in doing so he edits out complexity that would have made them richer characters.

Still, *White Man's Burden* makes you think, and it is a movie that is about something — either one of which is more than you can say about most of the competition at the local cineplex.

'White Man's Burden'

Written and directed by Desmond Nakano; produced by Lawrence Bender. A Savoy Pictures release, playing at AMC Franklin Mall and Southwyck and rated R for strong language and some violence. Running time: 90 minutes.

Critic's rating: ★★½

Louis Pinnock	John Travolta
Thaddeus Thomas	Harry Belafonte
Marsha Pinnock	Kelly Lynch
Megan	Margaret Avery
Stanley	Tom Bower

★★★★ Excellent; ★★★½ Very Good; ★★★ Good; ★★½ Above Average; ★★ Average; ★½ Below Average; ★ Poor

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